

# Language Anxiety, Tension, and the Fashioning of L2 Selves

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## ABSTRACT

This reflection paper explores the connections between observations of two “shy” students in different classes and the literature on learner anxiety, willingness to communicate, and L2 identity. Taking the influential concept of language anxiety as a starting point, it considers possible effects of classroom atmosphere and the students’ perceived competence on their performance. The concepts of learners’ willingness to communicate and positive construction of L2 selves are then considered both as potentially better goals than anxiety reduction and as possible approaches to reducing debilitating anxiety while increasing euphoric tension.

## INTRODUCTION

Language anxiety is a contentious concept, but it seems to provide a name for something that many have experienced or observed as language learners and teachers. In the EDC program, teachers have written about students who despite seeming outgoing in Japanese communication before class, became reticent, frustrated, and anxious in English (Singh, 2013; Yamauchi, 2013), and quantitative studies among other Japanese university students have found that half or more “suffered from some level of anxiety” in their English classes (Andrade & Williams, 2009, p. 5). Research has shown that this anxiety is best not thought of as simply a manifestation of a general “trait anxiety”; rather than an element of one’s enduring personality, it is a “state anxiety” induced in particular situations (Singh, 2013; Trang, 2012). Additionally, while some have argued that some of this anxiety can facilitate second language acquisition by fostering greater motivation (Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001), anxiety is most often seen as debilitating (Andrade & Williams, 2009; Horwitz, 2010; and Trang, 2012).

Horwitz (2000) suggests a helpful analogy to illustrate her influential conceptualization of this debilitating language anxiety, namely, wearing unflattering clothing, like speaking in a foreign language, makes us “feel that we are presenting a less positive version of ourselves to the world than we normally do,” and it is precisely “this disparity between how we see ourselves and how we think others see us” that is the fundamental source of language anxiety (p. 258). Poststructuralist second language acquisition (SLA) theory suggests that speaking in a second language (L2) is a process fraught with even greater potential tension. As Norton (2000) notes, “When language learners speak, they are not only exchanging information with target language speakers, but they are constantly organizing and reorganizing a sense of who they are and how they relate to the social world” (p. 11, cited in Swain & Deters, 2007, p. 827). In other words, attempting L2 communication may not simply reveal a gap between the presented self and the imagined true self it obscures, but risk a loss or transformation of this self; to modify the old saying, the L2 clothes (re)make the (wo)man. Yet to take the analogy a little further still, as with a new outfit, there is also potential for excitement, or “euphoric tension,” with the transformation and fashioning of a new self that the clothes can enable (Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001).

In this article, I reflect on my observations of two students in two discussion classes who first seemed simply “shy,” not only in English but also in Japanese, but whose behavior seems better explained in terms of anxiety and tension and these elements’ connection to students’ willingness to communicate (WTC). Through reflection on their and other students’ behavior, I found that I was giving excessive weight to the influence of a supposed relatively fixed personality on classroom behavior, when it would be more productive to think in terms of affective states and evolving identities. These reflections illustrate some of the interplay among

personality, environmental, and confidence factors in language anxiety and how this influences student behavior, and suggest that teachers attend to students' co-construction of L2 selves.

### **DISCUSSION**

#### **Initial Observations**

One lower-intermediate level class seemed to present itself in the first week as problematic, and one quiet student, whom I will call Keiko, especially worried me. I sensed an odd tension in the atmosphere and early activities and discussions were marked by awkward silences. I initially interpreted this as a kind of student resistance and negative attitude toward the class stemming from the students' low English proficiency and motivation, and more troublingly, this seemed even to extend to indifference toward their classmates. Keiko seemed proficient in English, but her verbal participation was limited and inconsistent in this atmosphere. One very friendly higher-intermediate class provided a good contrast to Keiko's, especially because it also had one especially quiet student, whom I will call Nobuko. Like Keiko, even though she had apparent proficiency, Nobuko spoke rarely and haltingly, sometimes even trembling.

I began my focused observations in the fifth week of the course, yet it was already apparent that there had already been some changes in the two students' behavior. In the lower-intermediate class, Keiko had begun speaking significantly more and performing well with each classes' target phrases, though she still spoke quietly and sporadically. Meanwhile, in the upper-intermediate class, Nobuko remained quiet, though she continued to show signs of nonverbal engagement. This difference was reflected in the first discussion test scores. Keiko participated actively and met all the criteria to earn a high score, while Nobuko scored significantly lower than her classmates, primarily because she rarely interjected in her group's lively discussion.

#### **Classroom Atmosphere**

Differences in classroom dynamics and context seemed salient as I observed different levels of change between Keiko's and Nobuko's performance, but in unexpected ways. In the lower-level class, Keiko grew more comfortable talking with her classmates as the mood warmed, and pauses in her group's discussions gave her many opportunities to join it. Her classmates often needed help expressing their ideas, and they welcomed her follow-up questions and comments. Meanwhile in the consistently boisterous higher-level class, Nobuko's classmates would often get too caught up in the excitement of the discussion and forget to include her. The class certainly had a fun and pleasant atmosphere, and one that Nobuko also seemed to enjoy, but it was a context that created few openings for Nobuko to do much more than laugh and nod along. Concerned about creating a warm, safe, and cooperative classroom atmosphere, I tried different strategies for introductory comments, activities, and feedback to reduce student anxiety in both classes.

My initial impressions of Keiko's class had dramatically changed by the seventh week; they were now positive about participating, responding to my instructions and feedback, and working together. In addition to the use of humor, one potential cause of this change in general classroom atmosphere in Keiko's class was the greater emphasis I had begun placing on highly structured activities. While I had been concerned about overly limiting student output, many students in this class seemed to welcome the challenge of the puzzle of molding their ideas and questions to various prompts and A-B dialogue structures. What I had taken as resistance now seemed better explained as anxiety about the ambiguity and openness of the tasks (Oxford, 1999). While students in other classes often ignored rigid prompts so they could say their original ideas and then often used my suggestions more naturalistically at other points in discussion preparation activities, these students seem to draw upon the structure to generate

interesting ideas. This corresponds to Phillips's (1999) suggestion that cued-response activities requiring some creativity can reduce anxiety. Moreover, it connects to Spielmann and Radnofsky's (2001) concept of "cognitive euphoric tension." These students were cognitively challenged, but this actually led to a reduction of "affective dysphoric tension." While less closure-oriented with tasks and thus less directly affected by this change in task structure, Keiko grew more comfortable and relaxed thanks to this general shift in classroom atmosphere.

Meanwhile, the general atmosphere had less room for improvement in Nobuko's class. I began to emphasize in my feedback the need for balance in discussions and encouraged everyone to join the discussion boldly whenever they have a comment. Perhaps reflecting greater comfort with her classmates and responding to my encouragement, Nobuko often asked "Can I start?" and contributed the first ideas in her group discussions, drawing upon the preparation activities. However, after these initial comments, she mostly added only quiet reactions and a few halting comments. Her classmates paused at times, seeming to hold themselves back. They gently asked her some follow-up questions, and perhaps as a way of further decreasing anxiety-producing pressure and co-constructing a different form of participation for shy classmates (see Ewald 2008), they posed many questions to the entire group.

Nobuko sometimes answered these open questions, remarking once that she does not want to copy celebrities, but wants to "follow [her] own style." This independence showed in her interactions in the classroom before and after class, as well as her self-positioning in class. She seemed to prefer remaining on the periphery of groups, even physically, such as when she stood by the door listening and smiling as her classmates chatted in Japanese after week 9's class. It was surprising, then, when I noticed her chatting in Japanese before class in week 13, especially since she was doing most of the speaking while one classmate listened supportively. She seemed to be warming herself up for active participation in the course's final discussion test that day. Thus, as with Keiko's class, the more relaxed classroom atmosphere does seem to have eventually reduced some of the debilitating anxiety that Nobuko had been experiencing. Yet even in the final and very relaxed discussion in week 14, in which Nobuko posed a fun question about amusement parks to the group and spoke up to share several comments on this and other topics, her hands were often shaking as she spoke.

Furthermore, although both Keiko and Nobuko participated progressively more on average as the semester advanced and the classroom atmosphere generally became less anxious, stressful situations occasionally arose that reduced their participation. This was especially true for Keiko, who was grouped in week 9 with a classmate who tended to seek attention, dominate discussions, and close off to ideas different from his own. Likewise, Nobuko was more comfortable with certain classmates than others, though everyone was supportive and inclusive.

I am convinced that Nobuko and Keiko *were* affected by the classroom atmosphere, but it is equally clear that this factor alone does not go far in explaining the changes and lack of changes in their behavior. If this had been the primary determinant, then Nobuko would have been expected to experience less debilitating anxiety in the more consistently relaxed atmosphere; however, it was Keiko who grew more comfortable speaking in small-group discussions. It might still be possible to ascribe this difference to the enduring personality trait of "shyness," as Nobuko might be somehow more deeply shy than Keiko. But it seems more productive to turn next to another social, transient factor: state perceived competence.

### **State Perceived Competence**

Another factor suggested by the literature on language anxiety is learners' situational perceived proficiency (MacIntyre, Noels, & Clément, 1997), and this also emerged in my own reflections on Keiko's and Nobuko's classroom behavior. It was soon apparent that Keiko made her group's

discussions smoother and more interesting, despite her seemingly “natural” quietness. Once she began speaking, she seemed to get into the flow of fluent output. Early in my observations, she emerged as one of the strongest students in the class in terms of English proficiency. In contrast, Nobuko seemed not only to have difficulty speaking up, but also to struggle to express her ideas. She seemed to exhibit a distinctly lower level of English proficiency than her classmates; even when others asked her questions, she seemed to have trouble processing them and answering clearly, breaking the flow of discussions. In week 7, I began to wonder if her apparent shyness was simply a product of poor English language skills, and that I had somehow missed this before.

However, through continued observation and further reading on language anxiety, I began to see that a focus on some “objective” language proficiency measure was primarily important to their WTC only insofar as it influenced the learners’ self-evaluation of their own proficiency. In other words, it was not communicative competence per se, but the L2 confidence that it fosters (or inhibits) and the “state communicative self-confidence” that this in turn engenders (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998). Although I was unable to gain a real understanding of Keiko’s and Nobuko’s private subjective experiences and perceptions, through my observations of their behavior, I could conjecture that Keiko received a great deal of positive reinforcement about her communicative competence, while Nobuko was often frustrated by the inarticulateness of her comments. Thus, although Nobuko’s classmates were often actually more supportive than Keiko’s and created a friendlier and more relaxed atmosphere, and it seemed that Nobuko’s English language skills were probably objectively better than Keiko’s, Nobuko must have begun to compare herself negatively with her seemingly more capable classmates.

While Keiko’s confidence increased and anxiety dropped quickly, Nobuko seemed to relax in class only until she attempted L2 use in group discussions. At this point, it seems safe to assume that the classroom atmosphere was far less salient than Nobuko’s lack of state communicative self-confidence, and each unsatisfying performance led to less perceived competence and more anxiety about revealing this lack of competence to classmates she had come to care about. Indeed, in the final week, Nobuko reflected on her performance throughout the semester, telling her partner that she often confuses Russian and English words when she wants to comment, leading to hesitation. She expressed worry that the wrong language would come out, which certainly suggests a low level of confidence in her ability to communicate in English, especially in such high-paced discussions.

### **Willingness to Communicate and L2 Selves**

Thus far, these reflections have yielded fairly obvious, though important considerations about “quiet” and “anxious” students: the general atmosphere affects anxiety in limited ways and reduced confidence leads to more anxiety. Language anxiety is therefore far from determined by personality, as research on language anxiety has shown (Trang, 2012). Indeed in observations, I noticed something interesting about Nobuko’s situational willingness to communicate. While she rarely spoke up in L1 or L2 interactions with her classmates before and after class, she expressed a willingness to talk with me in English before class. She was often the first to arrive, and we chatted while I set up. She could have easily avoided this interaction, but she chose to come early and discuss complex topics with me. Likewise, she had high WTC in pair work; it was only in group discussions that she remained quiet, but engaged. By contrast, in Keiko’s case, there was broader development of WTC; Nobuko might also have achieved more WTC in group contexts if more had been attempted to change the class’s social context and her role in it.

It nonetheless remains tempting for both teachers and students to consider shyness a trait. Indeed, Ewald (2008) found that students were more accommodating of shy classmates regarding participation expectations in group work than teachers; the shyness of students like

Nobuko becomes socially “real” for teachers and students alike. This reality is helpfully addressed by the WTC model. In this model, “personality” forms part of the base level of WTC. As the authors emphasize, this placement at the bottom of the pyramid gives it an important enduring role, but it is a role mediated by many layers of other more immediate factors, which may appear “trait-like” in that some patterns are relatively consistent over time (MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels, 1998, p. 549).

The WTC model thus suggests that the more enduring variables involved in one’s willingness to communicate are the least directly connected to L2 use, while the more situated and subjective elements are most immediate (*ibid.*, p. 547). For instance, “state perceived competence” and “state anxiety” are elements of “state communicative self-confidence” (*ibid.*, p. 549), which is only partly influenced by one’s more general and enduring confidence. And even this is only indirectly influenced by general personality. Teachers should therefore guard against unconsciously forming different expectations for quiet students. As MacIntyre, Clément, Dörnyei, & Noels (1998) argue, “The ultimate goal of the learning process should be to engender in language students the willingness to seek out communication opportunities and the willingness actually to communicate in them” (p. 547). And this is the goal for *all* students, even if students themselves hold strong assumptions about what can be expected of shy students.

The concept of L2 selves pushes the WTC model and its goal further and suggests how teachers and learners can extend and increase all learners’ WTC. While the WTC model considers its base layers, including personality, “stable, enduring influences” (*ibid.*, p. 547), a more sociocultural-influenced model of L2 selves insists that these identities are also evolving in social contexts (Swain & Deters, 2007). Learners are constantly negotiating their identities, as they are constructed through communication, social interaction, and reinterpretation. Just as one cannot simply translate L1 comments into an L2, one’s L2 identity is not “a mere transposition of one’s L1 self” (Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001, p. 267).

Yet many of my students expressed an expectation of this direct transposition. In the final week of the course, many students reacted to a prompt about differences between their personalities when they speak in Japanese and when they speak in English. Responses were mixed with some students claiming no change and some saying that they were actually less shy when speaking English, but a large majority, including Nobuko and Keiko, said that they were even shyer. This was usually expressed in terms of frustration at unmet expectations of saying what they want to in English. Some went as far as to say that they were “not clever” in English. While these expressions of frustration were not entirely unexpected, it felt as though I had just scratched the surface of something that had inhibited a large number of my students’ development of WTC.

In contrast, some students said that they did not really like speaking in Japanese, but that they enjoyed speaking in English; and some said that they liked communicating in both languages, even though it is different. One student expressed her disassociation of her L1 and L2 selves, explaining that she “can just say anything in English because it’s not the real me.” Reflecting on this now, I think that more attention to all the students’ L2 selves as real, but potentially different, could have led to more development of these identities and an associated increase in WTC. For students who identify and are identified as shy in their L1 especially, such as Keiko and Nobuko, this could foster the euphoric tension of an exciting transformation.

## CONCLUSION

In the course of my observations and reflections on two of my “shyest” students’ behavior, it became clear that language anxiety and tension influence less anxious students as well. The implications of these reflections thus extend to teacher sensitivities, attitudes, and practices for

all learners, especially in programs that demand a great deal of L2 output. Although EDC classes have many design elements that should reduce anxiety for many students, including support with conversational gambits, pair work, preparation, and small-group discussions (Phillips, 1999; Singh, 2013), it is important to remember that this is not sufficient for all learners and different elements may actually increase frustrations for some students with different expectations (Saint Léger & Storch, 2009; Spielmann & Radnofsky, 2001). Meanwhile, it is important not to disregard the social reality of personality and the deliberate (re)construction of L2 selves.

These reflections thus suggest a number of implications for further research and potential strategies to influence student performance. First, although fostering a low-anxiety classroom environment through humor and varied task structures such as cued-response activities was observed to be helpful for quiet students, a relaxed classroom atmosphere seems insufficient to foster learners' willingness to communicate. Moreover, while this did not arise in my observations, Spielmann and Radnofsky (2001) warn that students react negatively to what they perceive as teachers' "complacency" and "low expectations" (p. 271). Maintaining high performance expectations should therefore accompany anxiety-reduction strategies.

For instance, I could have enhanced the use of humor by encouraging students to play even more with the topics, perspectives, and language in order to make the discussions simultaneously more comfortable and more creatively demanding. Likewise, while emphasizing the value of balanced discussions and encouraging participation was effective, it might have been more so if I had also given feedback on the students' accommodation strategy of opening more challenging questions to everyone rather than keeping the nerve-wracking spotlight on the speaker. The success of adding more structure to activities for Keiko's class could also have been extended by acknowledging the challenge of constructing responses in a specific format and emphasizing this as a chance for students to show their creativity, like poets expressing original ideas through rigid conventions. All of these strategies would reassure students that anxiety is normal, but that they have the agency to transform it into euphoric tension. A more promising strategy might then be to address anxiety and tension directly with students and be sensitive to its powerful effects on their performance, rather than develop subtle background strategies to minimize tense situations.

Extending this, further research could focus on consciously promote the construction of students' clever and outgoing L2 selves with a high level of WTC. These include questions about fostering play in English and creating more opportunities for students to show their creativity, critical thinking, and intellectual engagement in their L2 identities. Research concerns would then move beyond a narrow focus on language anxiety to encompass the issue of promoting cognitive and affective euphoric tension for all students.

Equally, it seems helpful to create outlets for students' frustrations and concerns about their L2 communicative competence. Students' subjective experiences and perceptions may exist in a kind of black box, but this does not preclude opening conversations about them. These conversations with me and their classmates might encourage more realistic expectations and self-evaluations, reduce the sense of competition about proficiency levels, mitigate the negative effects of frustration, and lead to greater state communicative self-confidence. In the final week, students seemed to appreciate the opportunity to open up about their struggles and commiserate about frustrations. If this had come earlier, it might have helped students share strategies and reduce fears of embarrassment about sounding less intelligent in English.

Discussion classes in an L2 seem unavoidably fraught with tension, and both language anxiety and perceived personality traits such as shyness are major components of this. Taking Horwitz's metaphor of L2 use as the donning of a different outfit, the L2 discussion class becomes a weekly fashion show, where learners also fashion themselves. Learners are pushed to

“try on the clothes” of this other language in front of their classmates and teacher in every class, and each week the outfit changes a little with changes in topics, skills, and other factors. Over time, these communally designed outfits in turn come to define who the learners are in the L2, both to themselves and to others. Thinking in these terms suggests a continual need for research into attending tension and identity and investigating strategies to make this process more exciting and fun than frightening and frustrating, while remaining intellectually challenging.

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